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ED 012 566 FL 000 501

READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE--AREAS OF INVESTIGATION.

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PUB DATE MAY 67

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.28 7P.

DESCRIPTORS- *LANGUAGE RESEARCH, *MODERN LANGUAGES, *TEACHING TECHNIQUES, *READING INSTRUCTION, *VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT, LEARNING PROCESSES, READABILITY,

FOR SUCCESSFUL CURRICULUM REVISION REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF READING SKILLS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAM, THERE MUST BE CONTINUOUS EVALUATION OF EXISTING THEORIES AS WELL AS INVESTIGATION OF NEW ONES. AREAS WHICH HAVE ALREADY BEEN EVALUATED FOR THEIR USEFULNESS IN THE TEACHING OF READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE ARE READABILITY FORMULAS, DIRECT AND INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY STUDY, DICTIONARY USE, WORD STRUCTURE STUDY, AND THE TRANSFERRABILITY OF RECENTLY LEARNED VOCABULARY INTO NEW CONTEXTS. OTHER AREAS YET TO BE EXPLORED INCLUDE THEORIES OF THE TEACHING OF IDIOMS, RECOGNITION OF CULTURAL CLUES IN READING MATERIALS, AND FACTORS PREDICTING SUCCESS IN THE READING OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. THIS DOCUMENT APPEARED IN THE "DFL BULLETIN," VOLUME 6, NUMBER 4, MAY 1967. (SS)

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BULLETIN the DFL BULLETIN

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Published quarterly by the Department of Foreign Languages of the National Education Association, 1201 Sixteenth St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

The DFL Bulletin solicits and publishes original articles relating to the teaching of foreign languages. Points of view expressed in these articles may support or oppose positions taken by the Department of Foreign Languages as an organization.

CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE

Page

Reading in a Foreign Language 3

Language Camps in the United States 5

A Summer Language Activity School 8

The Native as an Aide in the Classroom 11

VOLUME VI • NUMBER 4 • MAY 1967

Entered as third class matter at the post office in Washington, D.C. Subscription rate, $3.00 per year. Single copies, when available, 50¢ each. Order from the Department of Foreign Languages, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Address all inquiries regarding articles to the editors. Questions regarding advertising should be directed to the Managing Editor.

Reading in a Foreign Language:

Areas of Investigation

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Acting upon the assumption that history can be useful to us in providing guidelines for solution or avoidance of problems in the contemporary world, we should recall that for many decades in the era prior to World War II the stated goal of foreign language instruction was the teaching of the reading skill. As late as 1942, a foreign-language curriculum guide for the state of Missouri produced in that year restated this objective and explicitly eliminated the goal of teaching of oral skills in the language as being impractical and impossible of attainment considering the length of instructional sequences. The parents, uncles, aunts, and grandparents of present-day modern language students received their foreign-language instruction in courses designed to meet the reading objective, and it would be worthwhile for us to inquire how many of them have continued to read or can still read in any language other than English with any degree of proficiency. Even without serious research and investigation, we can conclude that, in spite of conscientious efforts on the part of many language teachers of that period, a generation of able readers of foreign languages was not produced and that the emphasis on grammar and translation which was expected to implement the stated goal of reading proficiency failed notably to achieve the desired result.

Since World War II we have not only restated our principal objective in language instruction, recognizing the importance of the skills of auditory comprehension and speaking, but we also had the advantage of the increased application of linguistic and psychological principles to our teaching problems. Granting that language is first of all speech, the primary symbolic system, and that written forms constitute a secondary symbolic system which is anchored on the primary one, we are generally agreed that the relationship between the two must be respected through establishment of a sound base of oral mastery before the teaching of reading. Though we are still in the midst of a healthy controversy as to how and to what extent we should proceed in eliminating reference to the mother tongue in the establishment of meanings, we are also generally agreed that the ultimate test of mastery is the ability to use the new language automatically and directly for all purposes of communication. George Scherer has stated that reading power depends upon "automatic and direct understanding of the structural patterns of the language from seeing their written representations." Robert Lado defines reading as "grasping the language patterns from their written representation quickly without analysis of what symbols represent what sounds."

Though we have developed many techniques for achieving this direct and automatic mastery as it relates to oral skills of communication and in our enthusiasm have warmly contended with one another as to the relative merits of each, we have not yet sufficiently elaborated teaching strategies and procedures for achieving the same level of mastery in reading. In our preoccupation with establishment of our principal objective of developing skills of auditory comprehension and speaking, we have done less that is innovative and at the same time systematic in generating new ideas for achieving the still important objective of establishing reading competency. We are under the indictment of some of our colleagues that we are educating a generation of illiterates in foreign language; and while we can feel secure enough in the knowledge that we are laying a firm base for reading through audio-lingual instruction, we are in danger of assuming that this competency will automatically blossom forth as the culmination of a successful audio-lingual program. The curriculum reform in which we have been engaged must be as fruitful in the development and testing of instructional theories about the teaching of reading as it has been in developing theories about teaching for oral mastery.

In the sweep of the reform since World War II, there has been a lag between the introduction and implementation of new audio-lingual techniques and the design and publication of research investigations which will provide definitive guidelines for decision-making concerning teacher-education, curriculum, and preparation of teaching materials. Therefore, as we extend the scope of the reform into a consideration of new approaches to the teaching of reading in the foreign language, the implementation of these new approaches must be accompanied by organized studies of their effectiveness in order that successful approaches be institutionalized as quickly as possible into new curricula.

It is natural that a larger body of writing exists to assist us to introduce and extend the first phases of reading in a foreign language. There is a fairly clear consensus that initial experiences in reading should deal with forms identical with those which have already been over-learned orally. During this period the students are helped to form generalizations concerning the way in which the graphic symbols represent the sounds of the language, in other words to recognize what Lado calls the "fit." He suggests the following organization of the work being done by the teacher in leading students to form these habits of recognition: first, presenting the regular patterns of sound representation; second, dealing with problems caused by interference from the fit of the native language, if it is represented by the same alphabet; then, dealing with problems caused by multiple patterns of fit; and lastly, dealing with exceptions as needed, rather than asking students to memorize lists of exceptions. It is not to be presumed that such instruction is done in isolation from meaningful context or entirely completed before reading of sequential material is undertaken. Instead it proceeds simultaneously with the reading of learned dialogue material.

If elements of fit occur in such material which are out of sequence

READING (Cont.)

with this orderly presentation of sound-symbol correlations, they can merely be taught briefly as entities without analysis or drill. This procedure can be followed even with languages represented in alphabets other than the Latin, as for example Russian. The taped dialogues can be replayed as the students follow the printed lines, so that association with the learned auditory signal is immediate and vivid. Students can quickly proceed to reading whole lines out of sequence or even to the reading of recombination material before the analysis and drill of all the sound-symbol correspondences have been completed. Material based on the recombination of familiar structures and lexical items into new content leads students into the second stage of this first phase of reading. These two stages should overlap and should continue to recur even after later phases of reading are achieved, as reading in these ways will serve to consolidate skills and to provide enjoyment and a sense of accomplishment for the student.

The second phase of reading begins when the student has safely recognized and can more or less automatically respond to the system of phoneme-grapheme correspondences of the language. Up to this point, the material he has read has been made entirely familiar through recent oral practice. He has not had to seek for new meanings, nor has he been thrust into the decoding habits of the mother tongue through the unexpected appearance of new cognates. In the second phase of reading, new meanings will be acquired through reading as well as through conversation and his grasp of sound-letter correspondences appropriate to the new language will be tested through the new cognates he encounters. At this point, the question of the rate at which such new meanings should occur arises. Scherer and Wertheimer, in 1964, tested a density formula of one new word in every 35 running words, with careful spacing of new elements of meaning and with frequent repetition. They eliminated the counting of obvious cognates, loan words, similar place names, and derived forms (if care has been taken to teach the derivational system).

The formula was felt to be useful by these investigators and appeared to maintain the link with the audio-lingual associations built up in the pre-reading period. It is certainly not excessively restrictive as compared with the formula of five in 100 suggested for American primary children at the same level of reading in their own language. The discrepancy between these expectations is certainly in part related to the relation of word meanings to concept and the greater conceptual sophistication of secondary students learning to read a new language. Whatever formula may be prescribed, however, the concern with control of density and redundancy predicates the use of contrived materials during this phase of reading and raises many questions concerning ways in which new vocabulary should be taught.

In examining suggestions for the teaching of reading, it is useful to look, not only at our own experience as foreign-language teachers, but also at reports on similar teaching problems as they concern the mother tongue. In both areas of teaching it is essential to recognize the importance of contextual clues. Scherer advises the discouragement of the use of a glossary and assisting the student to make inferences about meaning from the clues which surround the unknown word. McCullough, in 1958, reviewed research on word study in context in English and concluded that students must be led to understand that context clues extend beyond the sentence in which the unknown word appears. She also listed context clues which should be taught by teachers as: experience clues, comparison-contrast clues, synonym clues, summary clues, definition clues, clues of familiar expression, and presentation clues (word order or syntax). Too often teachers believe that it is possible for students to learn unfamiliar context and new vocabulary from the same reading, but it should be obvious that if the context is unknown, it cannot furnish clues to unfamiliar words.

Wide reading in a familiar context containing some unfamiliar words is necessary to building vocabulary. This necessity lends further support for the recommended use of contrived materials during this second phase of reading. Scherer feels that they should not be abandoned during this period (which he calls Stage III) until the student controls well at least 2000 words and that suitable reading material for such students can best be obtained from the works of a good textbook writer who is also a native speaker, rather than from over-adapted selections of mediocre literary quality.

In addition to using context clues for getting at the meanings of unfamiliar words, the teacher must plan for more systematic ways of introducing new vocabulary. In part such decisions will depend upon the type of instructional materials provided and the extent to which the material has been controlled as to density and redundancy of new lexical items. As foreign-language teachers, we are especially sensitive to distinctions of this kind. We are familiar with the traditional textbook which began each unit with a vocabulary list, defined in English, and intended to be memorized. In some of the materials which have recently appeared the same device appears, except that the definitions are in the target language. We should ask ourselves whether the system is a bad one or whether it has instead been misused. Many of us may be unaware that the same question has plagued teachers of English.

Alm, writing in 1957, warned that much of what is termed word study, writing definitions of words from supplied lists, out of context, is of little value and that direct vocabulary instruction must present words which the student has an opportunity to use in meaningful contexts. Even the traditional foreign-language texts proceeded to provide the context for the word lists studied, so it might be said that there has been misuse of direct vocabulary study materials in our own field. It is significant that one investigation of residual benefits of a semester's study of vocabulary reported special emphasis on making the new words studied a part of the student's oral vocabulary. Ten minutes a day were devoted to discussing the meaning, use, and grammatical classification of words, and it was reported that significant gains remained after two and a half years.

The investigator (Miles, 1945) estimated from his and similar studies that the effect of direct word study is approximately three times that of incidental word study. The term incidental word study refers to the practice of dealing with new meanings of words as they occur in material being read. However, McCullough indicated that both direct and incidental methods are valuable and that neither should be used to the exclusion of the other. One form of direct word study involves instruction concerning word structure. Scherer states that the derivational system should be presented as soon as a sufficient number of examples of a pattern have been learned to illustrate it clearly.

It has been the feeling of this writer that considerable gain in reading vocabulary can be achieved in this way. However, a study done in 1955 in 20 seventh-grade English classes indicated that there was no measurable improve-

ment in general vocabulary or reading comprehension after instruction in prefixes and roots for 30 days, ten minutes a day. The students were tested by ability to interpret meaning of unfamiliar words containing the elements taught. Only those of high intelligence showed a statistically reliable gain in ability to interpret new words. As foreign language teachers we have understandably become disillusioned as to the value of the dictionary as a vocabulary-building tool. It is heartening to learn that reading teachers have shared our feelings.

Serra, in 1953, surveyed research results and came to the conclusion that a method in which the teacher supplies a definition, explains it, and illustrates its use is superior to one in which the student uses the dictionary for himself. In summary, a number of hypotheses and a warning in connection with problems of vocabulary development can be offered, the hypotheses being adapted from a report of Gray in 1951: (1) Reading vocabulary becomes permanent vocabulary only if it is transformed to writing, speaking, and thinking vocabularies. (2) Teachers should constantly direct their students' attention to words — to appropriateness of the author's choice of words, to accuracy of meaning, to the power of words in appealing to the various senses. (3) Teachers should offer more than one choice when a word is required so that pupils may practice selecting the exact word. (4) Reading material must contain unknown words to afford practice in extending word meaning, but the number of new words should not be great, and material with numerous context clues should be used.

The warning comes from no single source but simply from the accumulation of experience in observing reading teaching and in teaching reading in both the mother tongue in foreign languages, as well as from observation of the behavior of enthusiasts for one method or another. That is, that reading, like all language skills, is a very complex form of human behavior. It is not possible for us to classify simply all of its various elements and to prescribe a procedure which will be effective in presenting and dealing with each.

It is far better to apply a complex of methods, techniques, and approaches than to accept a single one dogmatically. If we can then arrive at the creation of a teaching strategy which will lend itself to analysis and testing, we should report the results of such testing to others of our profession and be willing to test one strategy against another.

Some of the areas of investigation which would be helpful to the foreign-language teacher would be similar to those which have preoccupied reading specialists in American schools, such as readability formulas, the value of direct and incidental vocabulary study, the use of the dictionary in vocabulary building, the effectiveness of the study of word structure, and the transferrability of recently learned vocabulary into new contexts. There are, however, other areas of investigation which have not concerned teachers of English. Some examples of these are the teaching of idiomatic expressions, teaching for the recognition of cultural clues and data as they occur in readings, correlations between reading ability in the native language and in the foreign language, factors predicting success in the reading of a foreign language, and so on. Many areas of concern will arise as investigation proceeds.

For the present, we should recognize that we have only begun to question our practices and objectives in the teaching of reading in a foreign language. Unless we continue to do so, to develop new theories of instruction, to test them against one another, and to report our conclusions, we will have failed to amplify an important aspect of curriculum reform which began with such vigor at the end of World War II and which is still in the process of development today.